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Work Based Learning

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Work Based Learning (WBL) entered the lexicon of higher education in the early 1990s as a term to describe learning that takes place in, for and through work. It is not a work placement, although the participant is usually employed throughout the learning process. It is not in-service training, a term more commonly used for courses designed elsewhere and run in the workplace. It is not a traditional form of distance learning, but neither is it campus-based. WBL is distinguished most clearly in its curriculum. Its programmes are designed around the learning needs of the practitioner and their workplace rather than the conventional disciplinary frameworks of the educational institution. It is learning embedded in the social, economic, political and cultural context of work. This entry introduces the characteristics and origins WBL and discusses the common ground it shares with action research in practice-centred inquiry leading to personal, organisational, and social transformation.

WBL is a significant development in educational practice that reflects the shift from an industrial to a knowledge based society. Although not represented on the balance sheet, knowledge has become an essential asset in all sectors of public, private and not-for-profit organisations. Knowledge that generates wealth or impact is contextual, timely and, above all, practical. 'Knowing how' complements 'knowing what' as a vital ingredient of success. WBL has become an umbrella term to describe this kind of knowledge acquisition - learning that is focused on achieving specific outcomes of significance to business or organisational objectives.

Origins

In simple terms work is a productive activity undertaken by an individual or group of people to achieve worthwhile outcomes. It may or may not be remunerated. It can be understood in its widest sense to include the multitude of ways in which people act purposefully in the world. It is interesting to note that we often identify ourselves through our work and the workplace can teach us a lot about ourselves. Work can be the place where we grow, acquire new skills and develop wisdom.

WBL emerged in the last decade of the 20th century as a way of defining and developing learning in, for and through work. There were two principal drivers in this development; policy initiatives to widen access to higher education, and technological changes that resulted in a significant increase in the demand for knowledge in the workplace. In the new knowledge economy intellectual capital has become the measure of organisational wealth. The workplace is no longer just a site of economic production but also of knowledge creation.

No longer can business or the public sector rely on skills training alone to equip their workforce. Knowledge has become an essential aspect of work with the consequence that we are witnessing a shift from training to learning in the workplace. This is more than a semantic difference. Staff development is no longer just about the transfer of skills but also the development of an attitude of inquiry that is open to fresh ideas and innovation. Learning in, for, and through work has become an essential part of the productive ecosystem that must adapt to meet the needs of the people involved in it and the organisations that embrace it. Knowledge has become a dynamic commodity and new ways of recognising and enhancing it are needed in the global marketplace. The workforce is also becoming more mobile and individuals are looking for transferable qualifications.

WBL is also shaping higher education where it is seen as a field of study with its own standards, and mode of study, offering an approach to professional development across the university curriculum. As work and learning converge the institutions of higher learning are adapting to align the requirements for university accreditation with the lifelong learning of individual workers and the long-term development of organisations. Formal learning is no longer seen as a contract between institution and student but is located in a partnership between the institution, the employer and the employee.

Several influences in higher education have preceded these developments. Work placements have long been included in teaching, social work, nursing and engineering although their contribution to formal learning outcomes was limited. University structures were not able to keep up with the expanding range of professional and academic interests students wanted to study and they began to expand Independent Studies from a single course to full degree programmes, giving individuals or groups an opportunity to negotiate learning outcomes specific to their own interest and need. This was further enhanced by systems designed to recognise learning acquired in other institutions or from experience. Individuals were able to negotiate their own learning agreements and obtain recognition based on a portfolio of prior learning. These developments provided the emerging field of WBL with the basic tools needed to recognise learning in, for and through work.

Characteristics of Work Based Learning

WBL is a broad and expanding field of learning, leading to qualifications at all levels of higher education from Certificate to Doctorate degrees and in all professions. It has several significant characteristics:

WBL recognises that learning is already happening in the workplace. It does not initiate the learning process. Practitioners are continuously reshaping their practice through experience and interaction with others. WBL recognises that learners bring significant prior knowledge (often tacit) into the formal learning process. Everyone is an emerging expert in their own practice.

WBL engages with the interests and needs of the workplace, not the disciplinary boundaries of the university. However, while the WBL curriculum is project-oriented, focusing on the desired outcomes of the participant and their employer not the learning outcomes of subject based study, it is set in a framework designed to pose cognitive and experiential uncertainty in order to deepen critical awareness and achieve worthwhile ends.

WBL is about the development of the learner as much as what is learned. It is about becoming a good practitioner, about making good choices, about treating others with respect - ultimately about transforming work practices to achieve worthwhile aims while at the same time transforming the practitioner. It therefore addresses questions of personal identity and values.

While WBL can, and does occur on an individual basis, there is a growing commitment to WBL that takes place in partnerships between the participant, their employers and institutions of higher learning. This has obvious benefits in providing a context in which the learning can be supported and practised and offering a return to the sponsoring enterprise in aligning personal development and organisational mission.

The curriculum of WBL is work. Work, in all its variety, does not map easily onto the traditional disciplinary frameworks of college or university study. It is transdisciplinary in nature. As a result learning is assessed through generic learning outcomes that focus on the quality of inquiry and judgement evident in the learning. Disciplinary knowledge is not, however, excluded. It may be necessary for a practitioner to acquire specific knowledge relevant to their field of professional practice and this may be included in a learning agreement.

Knowledge Creation

Various scholars have recognised what has been called the “Practice Turn” or the “Action Turn” in the social sciences. Both recognise that work is often conducted in turbulent conditions in which knowledge is in constant flux. Yesterday’s knowledge is a poor fit for today’s challenges. In a widely referenced publication, Helga Nowotny and her colleagues drew attention to the way in which the boundaries between the context in which knowledge is produced and the context in which it is used have become blurred. What they call Mode 1 knowledge arises from rigorous inquiry in closed groups using established methods. Once published, Mode 1 knowledge may be applied in practice. Mode 2 knowledge, on the other hand, emerges from socially diverse sources and a wide range of practitioner experience. It is oral, contextual, multi-layered and often contested. Mode 2 knowledge has open boundaries. From the perspective of the academy it is transdisciplinary. It is, as Nowotny suggests, inherently transgressive. Its philosophical roots are in Aristotle, Dewey, Heidegger, Gilbert Ryle and Polanyi, amongst others.

While Mode 1 knowledge may be necessary to meet the base line requirements of the workplace, Mode 2 knowledge is critical to the practitioner’s attempts to enhance and

transform their practice. Knowledge that is located in the intentions, actions, experience and sense-making of the participants, rather than in empirical data and logical reason is, of course, open to social and political influence - a challenge faced by both the work based learner and the action researcher.

Work Based Learning and Action Research

WBL and action research share common ground. They sit Janus like at the interface between academia and what Jurgen Habermas called the lifeworld, engaging on the one side with the discourses of the academy, wrestling for recognition of transdisciplinary or multiple ways of knowing, and on the other side seeking to articulate in coherent ways the complex and messy reality of daily practice. Both borrow widely from the tools of psychology, sociology and political analysis. Both are committed to practical ends. They both straddle the boundary between the personal and the professional. They share a pedagogy that enables the learner to reflect on who they are and on the choices they make and not just what they think. Both value the qualities of personal judgement and collaboration. Both reach beyond simplistic notions of reflective practice to engage critically with their context and practice.

WBL and action research share an epistemological position that recognises that the best way to understand a situation is to participate in it. They are committed to exploring the interactions between individual cognitive experience and collaborative forms of knowing. They both recognise multiple ways of knowing - knowledge can be conceptual, but may also be experiential, practical, expressive, and intuitive. They both bring together the experiential and the rational in pursuit of a greater wisdom than is possible from an exclusive focus on one or the other. These two perspectives by which the individual interprets reality exist as two different cognitive processes that when aligned provide a richer source of inspiration for

deliberative action. The one gives attention to emotional, narrative and affective perception. The other to the verbal and analytical.

Prospects

While sometimes employing disciplinary knowledge or research methods WBL flows beyond the boundaries of the disciplines, in pursuit of a more unified way of knowing. It draws from a wide range of research methods, although action-based approaches are likely to predominate and many practitioner-researchers adopt multiple methods. As a field of inquiry WBL is reflexive, responding to changes in the economic, social and business environment and leading the way in the transformation of higher education. At the heart of WBL is a commitment to effective partnerships between the academy, the employer and employee in the creation of productive knowledge. It is well placed to address the wider ecological implications of economic and social action. As a flexible and yet rigorous approach to learning, WBL can play a significant role in the transformation of our economic, social and educational systems.

In many of these respects action research is a natural partner to WBL although in the segregated structures of higher education there has been little opportunity for cross-fertilisation. Many in the WBL community view action research as a methodology or a source of practice-based tools of inquiry, perhaps unaware of its holistic, systems approach to the complexity of the practice situation. While action research can benefit from the insistence of WBL on practical outcomes (impact), WBL may find it helpful to explore the ontological roots of action research in a participatory worldview that leads to open, cooperative forms of inquiry. In their shared pursuit of an epistemology of practice WBL and action research bring

to the knowledge economy the conceptual resources, pedagogy and practical tools needed to recognise, accredit and improve good work.

David Adams

(1,958 words)

See Also

Action Research and Learning, Epistemology of Practice, Frankfurt School, Insider Action Research, Mode 1 Knowledge Production, Mode 2 Knowledge Production, The Action Turn.

Further Reading

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